

Porcupine

Description:

The Porcupine is a quill bearing, robust, short-legged, slow-moving rodent that spends much of its time in trees. Because this "pincushion on the move" has developed such a strong defense against predators, they require neither speed, nor agility!

That Would Hurt!

The easiest way to pick out a porcupine is to look for its quills, but be careful not to touch! Up to 30,000 quills are interspersed among the dark, coarse guard hairs of the back and tail. These black-tipped, yellowish quills are stiff; about 1-3 inches long, with barbed spines, and are the most distinguishing characteristic of the porcupine. The longest quills are on its rump; the shortest are on its cheeks.

The North American porcupine is the second largest of all rodents, the first being the beaver. Its blunt-nosed face has small eyes, and small, round ears. It has a chunky body with a high arching back and short, yet powerful legs making it slow-footed and strong. Its head and body are 25 to 40 inches in length, and it has a thick, muscular tail growing as long as 8 inches.

Where Should I Look?

If you actually want to seek out one of these quill bearing animals, check areas with trees! Although the porcupine is usually found in coniferous, deciduous, and mixed forests, in the west it can also be found in scrubby areas. The porcupine is primarily nocturnal and may rest by day in hollow trees and logs, crevices in rocky bluffs or underground burrows. It makes its dens in caves, decaying logs, and hollow trees. It is also an excellent tree-climber! The porcupine is found throughout Canada and the western United States south to Mexico. In the eastern United States it is found in Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and New England.

Once you find proper habitat, look for tracks from the little ball of quills. The porcupine's feet have four toes on the forefeet and five on the hind feet, all with long, curved claws which help it to climb trees. Porcupine tracks are easily distinguished; the long claws make depressions far ahead of the oval tracks, which are about 3 inches in length and 5 to 6 inches apart. The dragging tail quills leave a pattern on the ground between these prints, which closely resemble the marks of a corn broom on dirt.

Canoe Paddles Taste Good?

Porcupines are vegetarians, but sometimes eat more than just plants! In the spring, they feed on buds of leaves and twigs. Their summer diet includes roots, berries, fruits and seeds. In the winter, they chew through the outer bark of fir, hemlock, aspen, and pines trees to eat the inner tender layer of green bark, called cambium. Porcupines may also gnaw on used ax handles, canoe paddles, tools, and other items that may have been in human contact, looking for the salt that is found in human sweat! Porcupines also relish plywood because of the glue between the layers. Have you ever seen a wooden sign in the forest that looks chewed on? Probably the work of a porcupine.

Protected from Predators

As you would imagine, the porcupine does not have too many successful predators! If it senses danger, the porcupine spins around, presenting its rear to the enemy, raises its quills, and lashes out at the threat with its tail. Porcupines do not throw their quills! If an animal comes into contact with the quills, they become immediately embedded in the animal. Body heat makes the barbs expand and they become even more deeply penetrated in the animal's skin.

Some animals, like fishers, wolverines, and bobcats are experts at attacking porcupines, flipping the porcupine over onto its back with a quick swipe, exposing its stomach. Porcupines easily intrigue pets, and dogs are often easy victims to the animal's quilled defenses. Often, the result is a simple surgical procedure by a veterinarian to remove the impaled quills.

Humans may actually pose the most serious threat to porcupines. The concept of porcupines being a pest species has resulted in them being shot or poisoned in encounters with people.

Layers of Protection

Porcupines have three separate layers of hair. The first layer is a woolly under layer for warmth. The second layer is their waterproofing; designed to repel rain and snow, and the third layer is the creature's highly effective defense mechanism... the quills. Porcupines re-grow lost quills in about 2 to 8 months. Porcupines do not only use their quills for self defense. The stiff quills of the tail are also used as a brace to help them balance on a tree limb to rest. A porcupine will then flatten itself and appear to be a tree nest.

Reproduction and Offspring

Mating habits of the porcupine are quite bizarre. Their mating season begins with unique vocalizations between the male and female. First, the female will whine, moan and click her teeth. The male will then whine in return. The male approaches the female and they perform an elaborate dance where they rock back and forth on their hind feet. She then allows him to spray her head with urine until she is completely soaked. The pair will stay together for the next few days. Seven months after mating, the female porcupine has one porcupette, sometimes two. When the baby is born, its quills are soft but within the hour they begin to harden. The baby will begin to forage for food within three to four days. Porcupettes remain with their mother until they are four to five months old.



Porcupine
© Terry Thomas



Footprint
No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Porcupine
2. **Scientific Name:** *Erethizon dorsatum*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: 20-40 lbs.
Length (head and body): 25 to 40 inches.
Length (tail): 8 inches.
5. **Diet:** Inner bark of trees, evergreen needles, buds, roots, leaves berries, fruits, and seeds.
6. **Youna:** 1 (sometimes 2) per year: called a

porcupette.

7. **Lifespan:** 5-6 years.

8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Family: Erethizontidae

9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No

10. **Hunting Link:**